

## **WINTER TEMPERATURES CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO THE ELDERLY**

Each winter elderly individuals suffer illness, serious accidents, and even death related to cold temperatures.

Exposure to cold temperatures can lead to hypothermia, a condition when the drop in body temperature can become life threatening, particularly for the elderly. Symptoms include slow speech, confusion, fatigue, feelings of deep cold and numbness, decreased heart rate, pale and cold skin, and uncontrolled shivering.

Seniors on low-fixed incomes are especially vulnerable because they may hesitate to adequately warm their homes due to worries about high utility bills.

The Visiting Nurse Association has suggestions to help ensure a warm and safe winter for the elderly:

- Draft-proof doors and windows to help keep heat inside the house.
- Try to keep the temperature in the main room of the house at 70 degrees Fahrenheit or higher.
- Use only portable heaters that are approved for indoor use. Using outdoor heaters inside the house can result in fire and dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.
- Keep combustible materials, including furniture and drapes at least three feet away from any heat source. Never dry clothes on a space heater.
- Make sure there is a working smoke detector in every room and that the batteries are checked regularly.
- Stay indoors as much as possible during cold weather. If it's necessary to go outside, wear gloves and a hat. An uncovered head loses 40 to 50 percent of a person's body temperature.
- Dress warmly, indoors and out, wearing several layers of thin clothing. Layered clothing traps warm air and helps keep the body warm. Keep clothing dry; if a layer becomes wet, remove it.
- Consume hot meals and drinks, which provide warmth and energy.
- Drink plenty of water. The body loses moisture when the air is cold and dry. The body gets cold easier when dehydrated.
- Stay as active as possible to maintain blood circulation, which helps the body keep warm.

(more)

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The Visiting Nurse Association also recommends that relatives or friends routinely check on individuals 65 years of age or older during periods of freezing temperatures to see if the heat inside their homes is adequate and safety precautions are being followed. If hypothermia is suspected, 9-1-1 should be called.

“Many of our elderly find it difficult to ask for help, valuing self-reliance and independence, even if it means ignoring a need,” says Kay Hernandez, a registered nurse with the Visiting Nurse Association. “If you think an elderly family member or neighbor needs assistance, make an effort to help.”

Information about how to help ensure that an elderly individual stays warm during winter temperatures can be obtained by calling 214-689-2688 or going online at [www.vnatexas.org](http://www.vnatexas.org).



Cold temperatures can be hazardous to the elderly, but there are ways to help stay warm and safe in the home.

Volunteers with the Visiting Nurse Association deliver Meals on Wheels with portable heaters during the cold winter months.



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